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1982NSSD 1-82 Part IIIA:
Threats to United States National SecurityDISCUSSION PAPER

Issue: Is the Soviet Union more likely to employ military force in the 1980s directly against the US or its allies than is currently believed by the Intelligence Community?

A. Analysis:

We do not believe that at present the USSR intends to initiate military action directly against the US or its allies, but rather sees its military power primarily as the necessary backdrop for exerting pressure along the Soviet periphery and elsewhere. The strategic nuclear power of US, the credibility of US commitments to allies and friends, US and allied war potential, the US ability to project its military power all encourage the Soviets to be cautious in employing their own politico-military power. There are, however, a number of factors whose impact on Soviet readiness to employ their own military force or that of their proxies remains obscure and that might encourage the Soviets to use force more explicitly and directly in ways that could lead to US-Soviet confrontation.

B. Factors:

1. Soviet Perceptions of the US Will to Act: In recent years, Soviet willingness to employ military force or to encourage its proxies to do so was encouraged by perceptions of a lack of US will to respond to Soviet actions. The current US military buildup is dispelling such Soviet perceptions to some extent. However, US inability to sustain its military buildup or the growth of isolationist sentiments in the US might persuade Soviet leaders of US inability or unwillingness to resist Soviet aggression. The recrudescence of such Soviet perceptions would increase the danger of US-Soviet confrontation and encourage the Soviets to believe that in such confrontation the US would blink first.
2. Cohesion of Anti-Soviet Forces: Currently, the cohesion of anti-Soviet forces and the credibility of US commitments to its allies and friends act as critical deterrents to Soviet aggression. If the Soviets perceive that the US is withdrawing from key commitments or if key US friends (e.g., Saudi Arabia) or allies (e.g., West Germany) appear as though they are backing away from their ties to the US, the barriers to Soviet aggression would be significantly lowered. The spread of neutralism in Western Europe or the deterioration of Sino-US relations would probably alter Soviet perceptions of the cohesion of anti-Soviet forces and encourage the Soviets to believe they could use military force with lower risk.

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3. Soviet Perceptions of Opportunities or Threats in Contiguous Areas: To some extent, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was encouraged by the Iranian revolution and rapid deterioration of the US position in Southwest Asia. Greater disarray or instability in areas contiguous to the USSR--especially, Iran, Iraq, or Pakistan--might tempt the Soviets to intervene and create more favorable conditions for doing so. The Soviets might also become more willing to employ military force in contiguous areas if the US appeared to be re-establishing its presence in a major way--in Iran, for instance--so that it appeared as a threat to Soviet security.
4. Soviet Perceptions of US Military Modernization: We believe that the Soviets are concerned about current US modernization programs but probably anticipate that US defense spending will be tempered by domestic resistance. Their perception could change if US military modernization continues. The Soviets may grow increasingly concerned about the security and adequacy of their land-based strategic forces and may become willing to break out of the limits for strategic forces in the SALT II draft agreement, or to abrogate the ABM treaty. Major technological breakthroughs by either side would destabilize the strategic equation and enhance unpredictability that might lead to US-Soviet confrontation.
5. Soviet Economic Difficulties: Despite increasing pressures on its economy, we believe that current Soviet leaders are probably prepared to accept sacrifices to sustain the expansion of their military forces. Potential Western exploitation of Soviet economic weaknesses already troubles the Soviets. The "Threat" paper states that we do not see a Soviet "window of opportunity," but if economic pressures on the USSR and its allies, especially energy shortages, produce greater barriers to investment in military modernization or provoke significantly greater unrest in the Eastern Bloc, Soviet leaders conceivably could conclude that they had best act while they are still able to, especially against targets in the Middle East and Persian Gulf.
6. Vulnerabilities of Empire: The fissiparous tendencies in the Soviet empire are currently manageable. Were these conditions to deteriorate significantly, however, the Soviets would be tempted to use military force to overcome them. They would certainly do so in Eastern Europe and might in more remote areas as well. The Soviets, for example, might use military force against Pakistan to cut off assistance to the Afghan rebels or support Vietnamese use of force against Cambodian sanctuaries in Thailand.
7. Soviet Leadership Changes: Perhaps the greatest imponderable involves the likelihood of new leadership in the USSR in the near future. We believe that Brezhnev's likely successors will

TOP SECRET

-2-

TOP SECRET

continue existing Soviet policies. However, the passing of Brezhnev from the scene might bring into power a group which would press for still more rapid military modernization in the USSR and might be tempted to use military instruments more openly and frequently than Brezhnev's coterie. Such a group might believe that, in the 1980s--unlike the 1960s--the US would have to retreat from such a confrontation. Alternatively, the new leadership may seek accommodation with the US in order to reduce defense spending and put its economic house in order. In any event, Brezhnev's successors are likely to have little experience in foreign affairs and less of a stake in Brezhnev's policies.

TOP SECRET

-3-